

Mech 2181

Chapter 2181 Ferocious Piranha

The Chiron stood out as a proposal which had great potential.

Sadly, not many assistants realized the extent a spiritually-empowered teaching mech could aid in the training of mech cadets. While they had all read up on Ves and studied his best-known works, they still possessed a shallow understanding of his specialty.

That would change in time. Ves knew he did not need to spend too much effort to explain what he could do. Once they took part in a project, they would see for themselves what he was truly capable of and adapt their mindsets accordingly.

Ves announced some preliminary decisions. "The Chiron will largely conform to Miss O'Brian's proposal and shall be designed as an adaptable mech. After some thought, we have decided that a teaching mech with this much potential is too radical and effective to be released to the market. For now, we intend to turn the Chiron into a teaching mech that is exclusive to the Larkinson Clan. It will share some of the same properties as the Bright Warrior model."

Selfishness only played a part of this decision. Ves had thought long and hard on how to facilitate the teaching process through spiritual means. He wanted to go beyond what he did with the Young Blood and Old Soul, where he merely relied on self-created images to serve as imperceptibly spiritual mentors to the mech cadets.

While Ves had thought about creating a spiritual product which excelled at teaching, he eventually came up with a more radical idea.

What if he could take advantage of the Golden Cat instead?

The ancestral spirit was the heart of the Larkinson Network. She possessed a spiritual bond with every living Larkinson.

When Ves initially designed the Bright Warrior, he envisioned the possibility of enabling Goldie to pass on the mech piloting skills of one Larkinson to another Larkinson with the help of the Larkinson Network.

However, so far, this ability hadn't manifested yet. Whether Goldie didn't deem it necessary or whether she wasn't able to do so, Ves couldn't tell.

Normally, he had little confidence he could implement a skill transfer mechanism successfully in a mech design.

Yet now that he managed to achieve a breakthrough in his design philosophy and successfully tested the implementation of targeted abilities, he was certain he could use them to empower the Chiron!

As long as he programmed the right spiritual constructs that facilitated some experimental supernatural training methods, the Chiron might truly become a teaching vessel of his dreams!

If the older generations of Larkinsons could pass on at least a portion of their skills, knacks, experience and knowledge to the younger generation, then the latter would rapidly become very powerful!

The best part about this teaching method was that as long as Goldie kept amassing more piloting knowledge, the teachings she passed on became more and more effective.

Naturally, Ves couldn't guarantee the Chiron would be able to live up to its promise. It could be that his current spiritual methods still weren't enough to establish such a powerful teaching mechanism.

He might as well try, though. If he failed, he still ended up with a mech that did its job better than the Old Blood and Young Blood. He could use the lessons he learned from this minor project to do better next time.

There was also an unknown risk that the implementation might be faulty. This meant there was a substantial possibility that the mech cadets who piloted the Chiron could come to harm.

Ves had already learned that messing with spirituality and people's minds could be very harmful. The spiritual surgery he performed on William Urbesh practically killed the poor fellow original personality!

His fellow clansmen were different from random people who he didn't care about. He didn't want to treat his men and women as test subjects.

The only problem was that if he used the Golden Cat as the Chiron's design spirit, then he couldn't use anyone else but his own Larkinsons to test drive the teaching mech!

He eventually decided to trust in his ability and hope that the Chiron Project worked out. In addition, since Goldie was the spiritual guardian of the Larkinson Clan, she would never allow an innocent clansman to come to harm!

If everything went right, then his worries were moot.

After he finished outlining the Chiron Project to his audience, he moved on to another proposal that caught his attention.

He waved his arm, causing the projection of the Chiron to make way for a depiction of a very different mech.

"The Chiron isn't the only mech concept that we have approved. Felicia Slenn has proposed a very interesting spinoff of the Doom Guard. While her idea isn't entirely original, her Ferocious Piranha is still an outstanding mech concept with great potential. Would you like to present your ideas, Miss Slenn?"

The woman, who looked to be in her late twenties, nodded and stood up. Felicia Slenn happened to be an erudite mech designer, and her quiet and thoughtful demeanor reminded him of rational mech designers.

Was it a coincidence that 2 of the proposals that Ves and Gloriana approved just happened to come from more intellectually-inclined mech designers? They both utilized clever logic to come up with their proposals!

In contrast, he felt let down by the group of brave mech designers seated on his side of the table. While they came up with a lot of enthusiastic proposals, many of them went way too far or sounded wildly impractical. They had gotten so caught up with the possibilities that they forgot that the LMC sold products, not miracles. For all of their courage and daring, they seemed to lack intelligence and restraint!

"As Mr. Larkinson has mentioned, the Ferocious Piranha is a mech design that borrows several elements from the Doom Guard." Felicia Slenn spoke. "The mech is my attempt to address the market demand that has emerged after the release of the Doom Guard."

The simulation of the proposed mech rapidly zipped through space as its small and swift allowed it to cross distances at least several times faster than the sluggish Doom Guard!

"The Doom Guard's main strength is its ability to deter large groups of hostile mechs by complementing its flamethrower output with its fear-based glow. However, the limited range of these exertions combined with the mech's low mobility has forced it into a passive, defensive role. When I researched the market sentiment of the striker mech, I noticed many calls for a lighter and faster version that can fully keep up with any offensive maneuvers."

In fact, Ves encountered the same feedback, but he showed little interest in retreading the Doom Guard. Reading Slenn's proposal caused him to change his mind.

The woman continued her presentation. "My Ferocious Piranha aims to replicate some of the strengths of the Doom Guard, but differs from it in several ways. First, it's a light skirmisher, so it is fully able to keep up with any attack runs. Second, its glow is weaker, but still effective enough to disturb enemies whose minds are not strong or prepared."

"Why make it weaker?" Ketis asked in confusion.

"The reason why it is weaker is because the mech pilot of the Ferocious Piranha should be as minimally affected as possible. Ideally, it would be best if Mr. Larkinson can tone down his glow so that it doesn't harm friendlies. After becoming aware of the glow interaction between the Aurora Titan and the Doom Guard, I speculated whether it is possible to combine their glows in a way that blocks the harmful effects from impacting the mech pilot and any friendlies. I am not sure whether that is possible, though."

She looked expectantly towards Ves, who smiled.

"To be honest, I was astonished at your suggestion." He replied. "I have mixed glows several times before. The Doom Guard is actually an unusual result between the conflict of two competing glows. Adding the glow of the Aurora Titan into the mix is something that I haven't thought of. In my judgement, the outcome that you have theorized is plausible, and might very well succeed if I implement it correctly!"

"Does that mean..."

Ves acknowledged her hopes. "I approve of your proposal! While challenging to implement, it is a very practical and useful product if the mech lives up to its promise. The Doom Guard has already proved there is a huge market demand for a mech that can psychologically deter enemies. I don't need to perform any market research to realize that your Ferocious Piranha has the potential to become an even greater cash cow for the LMC!"

His praise for the Ferocious Piranha made Slenn incredibly pleased! She became very ecstatic at the thought of having one of her ideas come to fruition. Even if Ves earned most of the credit for enabling such a mech to come into existence, her contribution would definitely be remembered!

Before her head inflated any further, Ves raised his palm.

"There are two issues, though. First, calling the mech the Ferocious Piranha is not entirely appropriate. A name like that is more suitable for pirate mechs that love to swarm their targets. For now, we'll use it as a codename. Second, it is not entirely wise to allow a mech like this to become too prevalent in the mech market. We will design it as a premium mech with a fairly high budget in order to ensure it won't be abused too much. We might also decide not to release it to the market and instead add it to the arsenal to our clan in order to keep the benefits to ourselves."

A mech like the Ferocious Piranha truly had the potential to shift the outcome of every battle in the regions where it was sold. Making it more expensive compared to regular light skirmishers was a good way to ensure it wouldn't sell as much as the Desolate Soldier.

Another idea to limit its impact was to deprive it from its self-shielding effect. Ves contemplated whether he should design two versions of the mech, one with Qilanxo and one without her presence.

He could reserve the former to the Larkinson Clan and release the latter to the market without too many concerns.

The problem was that doing so might not be very well received at all by the market.

In the end, he decided to withhold his judgement and revisit this decision in the later stages of the project.

If he was in need of a lot of money or if he desired to bolster his fame for whatever reason, he could release the most potent version of the mech.

If his needs weren't as great or if he needed to keep his head down, then he could publish a more limited version of the mech instead.

Right now, he was inclined towards the latter. He had already attracted plenty of attention from society and did not look forward to painting an even greater target on his back!

That said, he still appreciated the idea. The proposals formed by his assistants had given him a lot of inspiration.

He decided to issue a reward. "Merill O'Brian and Felicia Slenn have succeeded in inspiring me and have contributed significantly with their fantastic proposals. Both of you are awarded with 10 Larkinson merits!"

The announcement put the two assistant mech designers front and center. Their fellow colleagues and rivals all looked impressed as they clapped.

"Thank you, sir!"

Though 10 merits did not sound like much, it still represented a year's worth of work for them if they did not excel in their performance. To obtain these merits right away brought them one step closer to acquiring powerful augmentations.

Ves smiled. "Aside from these two proposals, there is room for two more minor projects. It's unfortunate that none of your suggestions have met our standard, so my partner and I have decided to come up with our own mech concepts in order to fill the remaining slots."

Chapter 2182 Sanctuary

The Chiron and the Ferocious Piranha Projects both demanded a lot of ingenuity. Despite their third-class nature, Ves knew he needed to invest quite some time on spiritual engineering in order to establish their distinctive spiritual mechanisms.

This wouldn't be easy at all. Ves had to tackle many new problems and invent novel solutions. He had to explore his newly-discovered ability to create spiritual constructs and find a way to realize his desired outcomes for the very first time.

On top of that, Ves had to perform all of this work while also investing most of his time on his major projects! No matter what, the Valkyrie Redeemer and Cat's Paw Projects were simply too important to his interests.

This was why he decided to fill up the remaining slots with less ambitious minor projects.

That didn't mean the remaining two mech designs became less worthy. Ves could still figure out plenty of useful mech designs that didn't require too much work to be useful.

Of course, if he was willing to invest more time and resources into them, they could easily become more powerful, but there wasn't much pressure to do so to be honest.

Gloriana presented the first minor project that he and Ves had decided upon.

"With the increasing prevalence of LMC mechs in the Komodo Star Sector, glows have become more and more ubiquitous. Aside from the Doom Guard, the glows are generally supportive and helpful. However, that does not mean that their presence in an area is necessarily desirable. The LMC has received an increasing amount of complaints that the glows are too obnoxious or aren't welcome despite the mental boost they can provide."

Public spaces, ship interiors and so on often became disturbed when an LMC mech came near. The more LMC mechs showed up, the more disruption they caused, especially when different kinds of glows successively affected the same area.

One minute, a mech technician trying to service a mech suddenly felt dutiful. The next minute, he might become swollen with pride! After that, he gained a very strong urge to protect his fellow comrades.

This was a typical example of what happened in the hangar bays of many carriers that held different LMC mech models.

In fact, a fair amount of complaints even emerged from within the Larkinson Clan! As one of the most prolific users of LMC mechs, almost every carrier hosted a bunch of glows.

Though the existence of the Larkinson Network partially mitigated the effect of glows on their minds, some Larkinsons simply wanted to obtain a reprieve!

Therefore, Ves and Gloriana decided to design a mech that could offer these people a defense, for a price.

Gloriana activated a projection that depicted the proposed mech design. "The Sanctuary Project is a third-class offensive space knight. From a technical standpoint, the mech doesn't come with any notable bells and whistles. It needs to be resilient enough to endure focused attacks, but it also needs to be mobile enough to be at the right place at the right time."

"Most of you are wondering why the Sanctuary Project is necessary when the LMC already sells the Aurora Titan." Ves spoke. "The Aurora Titan is a great mech that can shield the mech pilot and nearby friendlies from the effects of hostile glows, but it is not designed to block friendly glows. In fact, the Aurora Titan's glow is also distinctive and therefore disruptive in certain situations. In order to address the growing complaints, there is a need for another product that can provide the succor that our existing space knight model isn't able to address."

"The Aurora Titan is also too impractical of a mech design to most customers. It's not only incredibly slow, but also very heavy and costly." Gloriana added.

Ves nodded. "This is why we have conceived of the Sanctuary, a mech designed to mitigate or neutralize the influence of any glow in the vicinity. No matter if the other glows are supportive of harmful nature, the Sanctuary can offer some protection no matter their nature."

To be honest, he spontaneously came up with this mech concept after he slept with a B-stone on his bedside table. He truly felt refreshed when he woke up after enjoying an entire night of rest without his mind getting affected by the spiritual disturbances in the Nyxian Gap.

This caused a lot of assistants to look thoughtful. Some of them even began to frown.

Miles asked a question. "Sir.. doesn't that mean you will design a counter to your own specialty? A mech like this might be able to negate everything that you have managed to design up to this point!"

This was a question that Ves worried over right away. Fortunately, he already came up with some answers.

"It's not as severe as you think, Miles. First, the primary effect of the Sanctuary is very difficult to achieve. No matter what, it is difficult to suppress a glow."

Ves manipulated the projection to showcase several scenarios.

An offensive space knight that represented a Sanctuary floated opposite to a Doom Guard.

"In a typical case, the Sanctuary may be capable of suppressing the glow of the Doom Guard. Both of their effects are very strong, and the exact effectiveness depends on how good the mech pilots are and how well they have bonded with their mechs.

The crimson third eye of the Doom Guard dimmed a bit, which signified that its mech pilot experienced some difficulties in melding with the machine.

Two semi-transparent fields appeared into view that visually simulated the expected performance of the glows of the mechs.

The field surrounding the Doom Guard weakened and made way for the field surrounding the Sanctuary.

When the third eye of the Sanctuary glowed brighter, the field surrounding the proposed new mech completely overpowered the glow of the Doom Guard!

"If an excellent mech pilot such as Joshua Larkinson pilots the Sanctuary, then its protective glow will absolutely be able to assert itself. If he pilots the Doom Guard instead, then the opposite will happen."

This was already a known glow interaction to Ves. The Aurora Titan only managed to overpower the Doom Guard most of the time because Qilanxo was not only powerful, she also didn't have to waste most of her strength on fending off a rival design spirit.

The projection changed to display multiple Sanctuaries and multiple Doom Guard. Both of them had been equalized so that the overlapping fields that represented their glows entered into a stalemate.

"Numbers play a role as well." He said, and swiped his finger a few times to remove some Doom Guards off the board.

The change quickly caused the Sanctuaries to become more overbearing. Their neutralizing glows completely pressed back the harmful influence of the Doom Guards!

"As you can see, as long as the mech pilots are all the same, if a single Sanctuary can't neutralize a Doom Guard, you can bring a second one. If the enemy fields two Doom Guards, then you can bring three Sanctuaries, and so on! This glow interaction alone will ensure that releasing the Sanctuary will not no matter how many Sanctuaries we sell, there is still a rationale for fielding other LMC mechs. In fact, our more dedicated customers will buy even more copies in order to guard against the appearance of a number of hostile Sanctuaries!"

Even if a lot of customers might decide to give up on other LMC mechs entirely, they still needed to buy a lot of Sanctuaries just to guard against glows!

"Sir, how.. accessible will the Sanctuary be? Will you make it as expensive as the Ferocious Piranha?"

Ves shook his head. "No. The service provided by the Sanctuary has to come with a price, but not one that will evoke too many complaints. For now, I have settled on a price and budget that is similar to that of the Doom Guard, so it will sit firmly in premium territory. Any other questions?"

"Will you design a landbound variant of the mech?"

"It's in consideration. We can develop after we publish the base model."

Catherine Evenson asked a question next. "Mr. Larkinson, as far as we are aware of, the power and potency of glows is not necessarily dependent on the cost and class of mech. Is it possible for a single Sanctuary to neutralize the glow of a Bright Warrior, which costs at least an order of magnitude more money to build?"

"Make that two orders of magnitude." Ves chuckled. "I have already thought of this possibility. The effectiveness of a mech has to be commensurate to its price. If this is not the case, I will make sure to correct it. The glow of a third-class mech should never overpower the glow of a second-class mech. This isn't something that I have considered too much, but every mech that we publish from now on will adhere to this principle."

Perhaps before, it would be difficult to ensure this would happen, but all kinds of possibilities opened up after the discovery of spiritual constructs.

In order to develop a ranking of glows, Ves intended to program a special spiritual construct that grouped the glows into tiers corresponding to their price and class.

For now, Ves mainly wanted to prevent the Friday Coalition from buying or producing his Sanctuaries en masse in order to counter the Hexer mech designs that he intended to design!

Some concerns still existed. Ketis frowned and raised a worrisome possibility.

"Our clan depends heavily on the mechs that you have designed. What if the enemy fields our own mech models against us? Even if the Sanctuary can't neutralize the glows of all of the mechs, what if they field some of the second-class mechs that you have designed?"

That.. was a very realistic possibility. It was a good thing that Ves was already paranoid enough to take this possibility into account. He theorized on it immediately after he came up with a priority ranking for his glows!

He smirked. "Anyone who thinks they can beat me at my own game will never succeed. As the inventor and creator of glows, do you think I haven't developed any countermeasures to them? The Sanctuary design is merely a lesser solution that I have decided to release to the public in order to assuage some of their complaints. I have many other ways to deal with my own products should they turn their weapons against our clan!"

He did not elaborate any further. Though he trusted everyone to keep their mouths shut, the less they knew, the better.

In truth, aside from manually asking his design spirits to deprive their glows from the mechs in question, Ves also intended to bake this function right into the design of his upcoming mechs.

It all came down to the priority ranking construct. Aside from ensuring that the glows of third-class mechs would never be able to overpower the glow of a second-class mech, Ves also intended to add some hidden instructions.

One of the hidden rules stated that any LMC mech piloted by a Larkinson possessed the capability to hard override the glow of a hostile LMC mech.

Another hidden rule stated that as long as an LMC mech directly deployed against a Larkinson or the Larkinson Clan, its glow directly turned against its own mech pilot and any compatriots!

Just like how Ylvaine actively rejected any non-believer from piloting a mech aligned with his faith, every other design spirit was more than capable of rejecting and hindering mech pilots they did not like!

By baking these two rules into every LMC mech design, Ves did not need to be afraid his products would ever cause his own downfall!

Overall, designing the Sanctuary represented another mark of progress to Ves. The invention of spiritual constructs truly enabled him to control and fine-tune the spiritual characteristics of his mechs to a much greater degree.

For the first time in a very long time, Ves finally felt he had regained a lot of control over his own products.

After treading the path of life for years, he finally corrected his course towards the middle by making some progress in the path of determinism.

This was true spiritual engineering!

Chapter 2183 Crystal Lord Mark II

The assistant mech designers already became fascinated by the three minor projects that Ves and Gloriana decided to add to the pipeline.

Despite their label, each of the mechs associated with the project had the potential to introduce a lot of upheaval.

The Chiron was an adaptable teaching mech that would allow the mech cadets of his clan to make rapid progress in their training.

The Ferocious Piranha was a spaceborn light skirmisher that finally allowed mech forces to employ the Doom Guard's fearsome glow in an offensive capacity.

The Sanctuary was a revolutionary space knight that possessed the rare ability to neutralize any glow as long as the conditions were right.

All three mechs designs would have merely been ordinary if Ves did not involve his specialty. Once he did, they gained a lot of added value without increasing their production cost!

Not only that, but Ves also intended to implement numerous innovations and new implementations into the design. Though he wasn't sure whether he could completely achieve every requirement he set, every failed attempt provided him with valuable data so he could do better next time.

The three minor projects each sounded so attractive that Ves felt tempted to devote more time on them. Sadly, there was only one copy of himself to go around. He could only devote so much time on all of his design projects.

Therefore, aside from taking care of the spiritual aspects of the mech design, Ves mostly left the tangible mech design work to his assistants. With Gloriana intending to keep a very close eye on their progress on this front, he did not need to be worried that the younger mech designers would go off-track.

With five impactful mech design projects on the agenda, Ves felt as if his Design Department already bit off more than it could chew.

When he swept his gaze over the gathered mech designers, he steeled his heart. With sixty capable Apprentice Mech Designers under his command, he shouldn't waste their capabilities!

With three design teams working on every minor project, The Design Department still had room for an additional project.

"I'm sure you are all curious about our final proposal." Gloriana teasingly smiled. "When my lover and I reflected on the LMC's current mech catalog, we have determined that we have designed too many spaceborn mechs lately. This is mostly due to our own needs as a new and growing spaceborn clan. While designing a large amount of spaceborn mechs is not necessarily an adverse development, we still need to remind the mech market that the LMC is a broad mech company, and not one that singularly focuses on mechs that can only fight in space."

In truth, this concern mainly applied to third-class mechs. Ves and Gloriana already decided to enable most of their second-class mech designs to fight on land and in space and possibly in the air as well.

Only certain mech designs that have to conform to very specialized requirements such as the Blessed Squire and the Cat's Paw deviated from this policy.

The Hexers needed to field large amounts of mechs that performed at their best in specific environments. Otherwise, their multi-environmental mechs would always be forced to push back against their Fridaymen opponents!

The Cat's Paw mainly served as a heavy artillery platform. Mobility was of little concern, whether on land or in space. Adding flight capabilities only wasted valuable capacity that could have instead been allocated to adding more weapons on its frame!

Gloriana continued her point. "There are many potential landbound mechs we can design. Frankly, we're spoiled for choice, and that does not even consider all of the landbound variants we can derive from our spaceborn mech designs. Eventually, we have settled on a simple choice."

The main projection shifted yet again.

This time, it depicted a very familiar-looking laser rifleman mech!

Since this was one of his old works, Ves took over the presentation. "I'm sure that all of you are already familiar with the Crystal Lord. Even though it is an outdated, lastgen product, it still possesses some distinctive strengths. Our mech forces still field a decent number of Crystal Lords, though they are admittedly becoming increasingly less attractive despite their modest glows."

The projection highlighted the distinct crystal embedded in the chest as well as the slimmer-than-usual laser rifle. "Part of the initial appeal of the mech is the integration of alien-derived crystal technology in its design. The large crystal embedded in its chest allows the Crystal Lord to mitigate some laser beam attacks by absorbing them. In the right moment, the mech can even unleash the accumulated energy in a powerful retaliatory beam. Aside from that, its laser rifle isn't just more compact than many of its contemporaries, but still manages to pack a punch."

He sighed. "Despite all of these features, the bronze label version of the Crystal Lord never really achieved great commercial success. Without the use of a unique alien crystal that can activate the synthetic crystals incorporated into the mech design, they aren't all that powerful. The silver and gold label versions of the Crystal Lord are a lot more competitive, but third-party manufacturers can forget about fabricating them without their own alien crystal."

His hand waved yet again, causing the depiction of the original Crystal Lord to make way for a draft of a more modern version!

"I have withheld myself from modernizing the old Crystal Lord mech design for several years. It doesn't make enough sense to perform a marginal upgrade when it's not really worthwhile. Some mech companies are obsessed with releasing incremental upgrades. The LMC is not one of them. When we publish a newer version of an existing product, we need to make it good enough to justify the decision to replace the older version!"

Some scumbag mech companies milked their customers by adopting a yearly release schedule or something similar. What they actually did was to engage in very regular releases of existing mech models and product lines.

Instead of improving an older mech design by a generational leap, the companies instead fixed a few bugs, added some improved parts, tweaked a few settings and gave the design a new visual makeover.

With just a minimal amount of effort, the mech company was ready to release a brand new version of the same mech!

Due to the peculiarities of customer psychology, there were always people who couldn't stand the thought of owning outdated mechs. When they became aware that a fifteenth version had just come out while they still owned the fourteenth version, they would do everything to swap out their old machines with newer ones!

Though such an approach made at least some sense when it came to products such as software, Ves always thought it had no place in the mech market!

For this reason, even if the latest mech generation introduced a lot of improved technology and components related to laser weapons, Ves still felt it wasn't enough.

The second edition of the Crystal Lord had to be more than just a landbound rifleman mech. It had to be more than the original version with better parts.

What Ves actually sought was to reinvent its entire mech concept and elevate its vision to a higher level.

Just like with the Sanctuary, the introduction of spiritual constructs finally tipped over his resolve.

He didn't want to wait any longer!

Cherie-Tovar Larkinson reluctantly raised her hand.

"Yes?"

"Sir, your draft design looks a little.. incomplete."

"That's because we haven't fully fleshed it out at the moment. We still need to determine whether to incorporate any crystal technology and whether we should license a ready-made solution from the LMC." he replied. "To be honest, the other projects demanded much of our time on what to add to the Crystal Lord Mark II."

"What have you already decided, then?"

"No matter the version, the Crystal Lord should always reflect its name and its original vision." Ves mentioned. "The Crystal Lord stands for a leader among rifleman mechs. It is a premium rifleman mech that not only excels at firing lasers at the enemy, but is also capable of mitigating incoming laser attacks. Ever since the MTA commenced the new mech generation, laser-armed mechs have shown up on the battlefield at an increasing rate. While there is always a place for mechs armed with kinetic and ballistic weapons, it is clear that they are not the darling in the current mech environment."

This provided fertile ground for a laser rifleman mech that excelled at fighting other laser rifleman mechs!

"The Crystal Lord Mark II will inherit the same balance between offense, defense and mobility. This is generally not advisable for more affordable mechs, but since the budget of the Mark II is rather generous for a third-class mech, we can still get away with it. Its rapid-fire laser rifle makes the mech suitable for mid-ranged combat. Its compressed armor plating allows it to withstand more attacks than typical rifleman mechs. Its slim and speed-oriented frame allows the mech to engage in run-and-gun combat."

This was all identical to the original Crystal Lord. The new design and components just allowed the Mark II to perform a little better. This was not enough to justify its development. Ves needed to incorporate at least some interesting crystal technology in the design. He also had to flesh out its spiritual characteristics, of which upgrading the design spirit of the original version was just the start!

It was only then that Ves would feel justified in designing the Crystal Lord Mark II.

As the original was his second original mech design, Ves possessed a lot of sentiment for it. It would have been better if he designed every aspect of the Mark II in person, but that wasn't realistic these days. It was much more convenient to allow his design team to do the grunt work.

Whatever mech design that might result after a few months, as long as he properly survived the entire design process, it would surely become a worthy successor!

"Are there any questions?" Ves asked.

A couple of mech designers asked some minor questions.

"How will your specialty apply to this updated version?" Mayer Torto asked. "I recall that your original Crystal Lord wasn't too distinct in the area. It's no Desolate Soldier in terms of glow."

Ves crossed his arms. "I don't have a solid idea yet, but you are free to offer me some suggestions."

"Can you add some sort of targeting assistance like you did with the Deliverer?"

"No." He shook his head. "First, even if it's possible, I wouldn't implement it in a mass market product because it's too powerful. I only released the Deliverer mech in the first place because the Sand War necessitated a drastic intervention. Outside of that, such a capability is best left out of the public's hands. Second, the Deliverer's glow is intimately tied to the Great Prophet. Mech pilots who don't believe in the Ylvainan Faith can't take advantage of this unique power. I'm sure the Ylvainans in your team can tell you more."

The young Sentinel mech designer looked sheepish at his Ylvainan colleagues.

Ves moved on to his last point. "The third reason to withhold this power from the Mark II is that I believe there are more ways to empower a rifleman mech design than providing targeting assistance. The battle effectiveness of a mech depends on both its frame and its mech pilot. Shifting too much agency from the mech pilot to the frame is not a good idea in my opinion. What I want to do instead is to empower the mech pilot. Offering more choice, providing mental encouragement and so on are all better options."

A mech like the Deliverer had the potential to make its mech pilots lazy. The spaceborn marksman mech essentially incorporated a cheat that allowed the mech and mech pilot to succeed when it should have failed.

The Crystal Lord Mark II ought to be different! Cheating was highly incompatible with its character!

Chapter 2184 Institutional Isomorphism

When Ves glanced at the project schedule, he felt despair. Starting up six design projects at once was a massive jump in workload.

Before, he already struggled trying to work on two projects at the same time, but now he had to split his attention between six projects at a time.

Fortunately, he already came up with a plan of approach to manage the incredible workload and demand on his time.

There was no way he could micromanage every single aspect of a project by himself like before.

The obvious solution was to delegate these responsibilities to someone he could trust to do a good job.

That latter part was a bit difficult to ascertain considering that all of the fifty new hires were pretty much blank slates to him. He had no idea who was suitable to be in charge.

For now, Ves and Gloriana chose the initial team leaders from the ones who appeared the most suitable according to their record and character profile. Whether these team leaders could actually manage a team and project remained to be seen.

Second, the pair still relied on some mid-level supervisors in the form of Ketis and Miles to solve all of the trivial issues.

Though both of the Journeyman candidates expressed a fair amount of dissatisfaction at dealing with these constant distractions, they soon shut up when Ves shoved a lot of Larkinson merits in their direction.

Everyone had a price!

As much as Ves favored Ketis, he took care not to pamper her too much. Though he considered her a friend, she was also an Apprentice Mech Designer who needed to overcome her own challenges in order to develop her design philosophy.

Handing everything over to her for free would only make her more complacent. By using his own progression as a model, Ves believed that mech designers like Ketis and the other assistants all needed a reason to squeeze the utmost of their potential.

Setting up a merit system was his way of laying down a path of progression to everyone. With a fair structure for awarding merits and a transparent list of useful, tangible rewards, every mech designer under his command had some short and medium-term goals to work towards!

Even if Ketis already enjoyed a comprehensive genetic tune-up during the Aeon Corona Mission, she still lacked a good implant. Ves already knew that she was aiming to earn hundreds of merits in order to save up for a good second-class cranial implant!

Seeing her exercise her duties with enthusiasm reassured Ves that she would be fine. As long as she retained sufficient time to work on her own designs, she became more motivated than ever to make the most of her time!

Though Ves did not have much experience with organizing a multi-team, multi-project design environment, Gloriana could draw on her personal experiences working alongside other Hexer mech designers.

She fleshed out the organizational structure of the Design Department and also instituted a lot of rules and protocols to make sure the projects progressed properly.

"It's not that easy to maintain half-a-dozen projects at once, but it isn't difficult either." Her projection spoke to Ves as they were about to collaborate remotely on one of their major projects. "Once you organize everything properly and put the appropriate supervisors in charge, we can easily scale it up. Bigger mech companies led by higher-ranking mech designers can easily maintain hundreds of projects at the same time."

Ves couldn't even imagine the complexity of doing so much design and research work!

"I thought that Hexer mech designers always have to put their designs through an arduous approval process."

"That's true. The council of matriarchs reject quite a lot of mech designs. This is why a Hexer Senior or Master tries to go for quantity. They design dozens if not hundreds of mech designs with the expectation that most of them will never be put on the market. Certainly, they can still be used in private, but most of them are discarded."

Damn! What a dreadful reality! Ves widened his eyes as he thought about the sheer waste in time, manpower and resources that this approach entailed. The thought that over ninety-five percent of someone's mech designs might never be put on the market sounded like a nightmare!

"Why does the Hexer mech industry even tolerate such a regime?" He asked.

"It's not as bad as you think. First, the mech designs that pass muster will always sell well because they have received the endorsement of famed and reputable matriarchs. Second, the competition in the Hegemony's mech market is not as crowded because of limited foreign and domestic competition, so any successful mech model will always achieve immense sales volumes. Third, the work put into the design of rejected mech designs never goes to waste. The lessons you learned, the shortcomings you discovered and the research results you have gained are all accumulations that will never go away."

In short, there was a logic to the Hexer policies. Just because Hexer mech designers were forced to design a lot of mechs due to an insanely high rejection rate didn't mean that they were being suppressed.

The better mech designers still achieved success. The Hegemony mech market still offered customers a lot of choice. The council of matriarchs merely filtered out the garbage models beforehand.

The stringent Hexer policies also encouraged every mech designer to focus their efforts on designing the highest quality of mechs that they could manage. Ves suddenly realized that a mech designer who focused so much on quality like Gloriana was a product of this regime!

Institutions shaped people. The matriarchs at the top chose very deliberately when they set up their rules.

Through institutional isomorphism, the structure they set up led to widespread changes in Hexer society that closely conformed to their goals!

In turn, the Hexer matriarchs and the people and organizations around them were subsequently shaped by the society they influenced.

It was a continuous feedback loop. Hexers did not see anything wrong with the ideas they formed and the policies they set. Instead, they became even more supportive of their own decisions!

Perhaps the biggest downside to the way the Hexers managed the mech industry was the concentration at the top. Novices, Apprentices and Journeyman barely had room to breathe, and they could forget about selling any commercial mech designs onto the market!

Most of them were either forced to pursue commissions or give up their independence and work for an established industry player.

This was also another reason why Gloriana only ran a small custom mech boutique back when she was based in the Hegemony.

In the Friday Coalition, a Journeyman was already good enough to set up a medium-sized mech company that sold thousands, if not tens of thousands of mechs a year!

Yet in the Hexadric Hegemony, an identical Journeyman would have only been able to sell less than a hundred mechs a year!

"Every state has a different way of managing the sale of mechs." She told him. "Most states maintain a fairly open economy, but there are plenty of states that maintain more restrictive policies like my home states. There are even a considerable amount of states that don't allow mechs to be sold at all because the government wants to hold all the power."

That was true. So far, Ves had been fortunate enough to grow up in the Bright Republic. His home state not only maintained a pretty open economy, but also allowed private ownership of mechs. He would have never been able to get his career off the ground so easily if not for these two conditions.

They soon moved on from this topic because time was ticking. With six projects on their hands, they couldn't afford to waste too much time on meandering discussions!

"Let's tackle the Cat's Paw Project for this session." Gloriana's projection suggested. "Unlike the Valkyrie Redeemer Project, we don't have to abide by the demands of DIVA and the Hex Army. It's a second-class mech design where we can exercise full power since it is solely reserved for our clan."

When they both called up a projection of the design, Ves briefly frowned.

Even though she said that their heavy artillery mech didn't need to conform to Hexer standards, in practice it was unavoidable.

The factory ship and combat carriers that the Larkinson Clan would soon acquire were all built by Hexers! This meant that the ships were built with Hexer technology, followed Hexer shipbuilding regulations and were being worked on by Hexer shipwrights and shipbuilders!

The Bunkers that Ves partially modified also followed this pattern. There were simply too many embedded components and systems in the bunkers for him to change. This meant that he had no choice but to conform to some arbitrary Hexer design limitations.

For example, instead of adding two or possibly four legs to their heavy artillery mech was not enough. The bunkers were designed to pair best with heavy mechs that featured six legs in an equidistant arrangement!

The design of the upper cover of the bunkers were also designed to accommodate six weapon hardpoints. There was hardly any point in adding more weapons to his Cat's Paw mech unless he wanted to add some spares. Putting less than six weapons in his design was also a suboptimal choice.

In conclusion, Gloriana's earlier statement might be technically true, but the reality was actually opposite!

No matter how much creativity he exercised, all of the design requirements and limitations effectively ensured that the Larkinson Clan's exclusive bunker mech would almost fit right at home in the Hex Army!

The draft design that they had sketched already reflected this inescapable reality. Resting on six legs that were meant to conduct a lot of heat from the mech to the ship, the machine boasted a broad, six-sided torso with a sensor-studded head and six different weapon barrels.

Due to capacity constraints, the pair opted not to stuff the mech with six powerful weapon systems. Though Gloriana reacted a bit annoyed at this decision, she knew that the cost of doing so was too great.

It was better to concentrate on fitting four proper main armament systems to the frame while devoting the remaining space to two smaller secondary armament systems.

Right now, Ves and Gloriana needed to settle on their choice of weapon systems.

"Energy weapons are indispensable. After all, one of the biggest advantages to bunker mechs is that heat management is essentially not a problem since the starship essentially acts as a giant substitute heatsink." He told her. "I think we should focus on punch and add a pair of powerful laser or positron beam cannons."

"Hmm." Gloriana looked thoughtful at the draft design. "That's not a problem. Laser weapons are more versatile and can be fired in many different firing modes. They're also easier to handle and more affordable. That said, the power and might of a positron beam weapon is a great advantage in itself. It depends on what kind of enemies you want our heavy artillery mechs to excel at taking out. Do you want it to fend off large swarms of weaker opponents, or a smaller number of stronger enemies?"

"The latter." Ves instantly decided. "I'm not afraid of an overwhelming number of weaker mechs, especially with mechs like the Doom Guard in our arsenal. It's the powerful opponents that we have to worry about. What if a Fridayman expert mech attacks us? What if someone from a first-rate state wants to get rid of us? What we lack the most is an answer to high-quality mechs with extremely strong armor systems. In terms of offensive punch, only lancer mechs can exceed the penetration power of a heavy artillery mech's large-caliber weapon systems."

They deliberated on the choice of physical weapon systems as well. Though they briefly considered sticking to energy weapon systems, Ves wanted to make his mech well-rounded enough to deal against a variety of enemies.

For example, if an enemy that was almost immune to energy damage such as the sandmen race suddenly attacked his fleet, he did not wish for all of his formidable artillery mechs to become irrelevant!

Ves and Gloriana were spoiled for choice in this regard, but they eventually decided to stick to something basic but solid.

"Gauss cannons. They're simple and direct!"

Chapter 2185 Xcordon Gauss Cannon

To second-rate states, gauss weapons weren't considered high technology. They worked on age-old principles and their performance straightforwardly scaled with their material composition and power supply.

A gauss weapon made of stronger materials was capable of withstanding much more forces. The stresses put on a gauss rifle capable of penetrating second-class armor systems was very considerable!

If a weak gauss weapon was forced to fire something more powerful than it could handle, then it would quickly blow up in the wielder's face!

Gauss weapons were considered kinetic weapons, which meant they mainly dealt damage by flinging a solid projectile at a target as fast as possible.

The mass of the projectile and the energy spent in propelling it forward determined how much damage the weapon inflicted.

There was a bit of room for flexibility due to these relationships!

The classical gauss cannon was geared towards channeling as much energy as it could handle to propel a heavy round at great velocities. Such gauss rounds were easily able to collapse weaker mechs in a single hit and punch straight through meters of starship armor!

However, the firing rate left much to be desired. Heavy gauss cannons focused on maximum power and maximum penetration needed to channel a lot of energy while simultaneously dealing with the incredible amount of heat generation as well as resisting the huge forces trying to pull it apart.

Typically, a gauss cannon fired once every five seconds or so, and that was under ideal conditions.

This wasn't necessarily bad. A mech that fired a heavy gauss cannon would always be subject to powerful recoil forces. Just as the coils of a gauss weapon pushed a projectile forward, an equal and opposite force pushed those same coils back!

Managing these recoil forces was one of the many reasons why such heavy weapons were mostly found on heavy mechs. They were the mechs that coped with recoil the best in the absence of sophisticated, energy-hungry compensating systems.

Of course, many of the more expensive heavy artillery mechs incorporated them anyway. Even if these compensating systems didn't entirely negate the recoil of a powerful physical weapon discharge, they at least lessened the impact, thereby allowing the mech to fire an even more powerful projectile than they normally should have been able to fire!

"Are you sure you want to add recoil compensating systems in our mech?" Gloriana asked. "While our budget allows for it, it will add a lot of complexity to our mech. The energy requirements for our heavy artillery mech will skyrocket as well, to a point where it is basically impractical to deploy it as a standalone mech in ground operations."

The Akkara, the quadruped heavy mech employed by the Flagrant Vandals, was a typical example of a mech employed in both space and land battles.

Rather than a pure bunker mech, it was actually just a landbound mech that also happened to fit in a starship bunker.

What Ves just suggested was to sacrifice most of the Cat's Paw landbound fighting capabilities in exchange for strengthening its performance as a bunker mech.

This was a very significant decision!

This did not mean he could deploy his Cat's Paws on land. The mech commanders in charge of leading them just had to work around their insane demand for energy, meaning that they would be effectively limited to base defense!

"I think.. we can accept this tradeoff." Ves decided. "If we ever have a need to deploy a heavy artillery mech that can take part in offensive operations, we can just develop a machine that is designed to fulfill this role from the ground up. Right now, I care much more about designing the strongest bunker mech that we can fit in our future factory ship and other vessels."

The Larkinson Fleet was the main home and sanctuary of the Larkinson Clan. Defending it was his highest priority and he could not afford to compromise its defenses too much!

"That said, even a gauss cannon that is focused on maximum power can still fire as fast as an automatic weapon at lower power settings." Gloriana added. "It just needs the right ammunition at hand."

That was true as well. Some gauss cannons were able to switch to a rapid-fire mode where they fired a large amount of lighter projectiles. They packed much less of a punch, but they were very suitable to intercept a large amount of cannon fodder or incoming missiles!

Of course, it was even better to mount weapons that were meant to fire rapidly in the first place, but it was nice to have the option available.

Though Ves accepted the suggestion, he also pointed at the smaller secondary weapon mounts. "In a real battle, our mechs should ideally focus on pounding the toughest enemies with its main cannons. We can leave the job of intercepting projectiles and weaker mechs to the secondary weapons of our artillery mech."

There were many different options they could choose from. Aside from the classic rapid-fire laser weapon, they could also opt to go for a rapid-fire gauss weapon or a pulse weapon that naturally possessed a high firing rate.

Gloriana made a suggestion. "In the Hegemony, pulsed particle weapons are a common choice for this role. Compared to laser weapons, pulse weapons are relatively energy efficient, can fire very fast, are not too weak and do not generate as much heat and physical stress. They are very reliable in battle and can keep firing virtually forever as long as it is supplied with sufficient power."

"There is one big downside to pulse weapons. They are hybrid weapons that fire projectiles at speeds far lower than the speed of light. It is very difficult to hit anything at longer ranges. Laser weapons are deservedly the most widely-used weapons in space because they can hit consistently targets at much further ranges!"

Both of them halted at an impasse. It was truly difficult to decide between a short-ranged but incredibly efficient pulse weapon system or a long-ranged but more demanding laser weapon system as the secondary armament of their Cat's Paw design.

"I think.. the long reach of laser weapons isn't a necessity in our current design."

"How so, Ves?"

He pointed at the projection of their draft design. "The gauss cannons that give our mech a lot of physical punch works best at medium range. The energy weapons on the other hand may fire positron beams that admittedly propagate slower than the speed of light, but not that much worse!"

In practice, positron beams still traveled at relativistic speeds, which meant that it effectively made little difference in most battles!

"I see now." Gloriana grasped his point. "Our mech already possesses a formidable array of long-ranged and medium-ranged weapon systems. Complimenting it with a weapon that excels in shorter ranges is not a bad idea."

They soon added a pair of pulse weapons to the draft design. As its only secondary armament, the weapon mounts looked considerably smaller and less formidable. This reflected their weaker power but also their weaker requirements.

Once they settled their weapon choices, they needed to find the right weapon models to add to their designs.

They soon stumbled on a problem that neither of them had dealt with for a long time.

"Since this mech is a private design, at least at first, the LMC needs to license all of its components out of its own pocket."

Ves immediately frowned. "What is the typical licensing fee of a second-class component license?"

"It varies, but the good ones that suit our Cat's Paw design the most will all cost at least a billion hex credits."

"That's the third of the price of a second-class combat carrier! Proportionately, third-class component licenses are several times cheaper!"

Gloriana merely crossed her arms. "We are dealing with components that incorporate vastly more powerful materials and technology. Weapon development companies spend considerably huge sums on R\&D just to keep up with the competition!"

That made sense. More advanced weapons were more powerful but also vastly more costly to develop, produce and purchase. The relationship wasn't strictly linear, and Ves could not use the exact same mindset he reserved for third-class mechs on projects like these.

All of this meant that he could not avoid spending a huge amount of money to obtain his desired licenses!

These days, Ves was not bothered at all at the licenses fees of third-class mech components. No matter how many different third-class mechs the LMC designed, it wouldn't eat up all of its cash reserves anytime soon!

It was a different story in this case. With every standard 10-year production license charging a fee of at least 1 billion hex credits, Ves had to be careful not to deplete the LMC's working capital too much.

Fortunately, the LMC wasn't exactly strapped for cash. As of this moment, he also hadn't spent all of the 5,000 MTA credits he won from the design duel.

Ves and Gloriana therefore exercised a modest amount of restraint when they began to browse the MTA's sizable component library.

Predictably, Gloriana insisted on searching through the list of Hexer-developed weapon systems. Her choice wasn't entirely arbitrary as pairing Hexer weapon systems with a mech that already incorporated a lot of Hexer design principles resulted in high compatibility.

It was too bad that Ves had a different idea.

Even if a non-Hexer weapon system couldn't immediately be slotted into an open weapon mount of their mech design, this meant that they just needed to do some extra design work!

As mech designers, it was their job to integrate different mech components into a coherent machine. Opting to go for Hexer weapon systems was merely a shortcut!

Since Ves did not limit his choices to a limited amount of licenses, he had an endless amount of choices to choose from. Even if he had to disqualify the vast majority of them because they were developed in different star sectors with different standards and material requirements, he still possessed millions of decent options for each weapon type!

This was one of the greatest benefits that the MTA provided to every mech designer. It pooled the efforts of everyone involved in the mech industry and made much of it available to the entirety of human space!

Right now, an interesting gauss cannon weapon system caught his attention.

The Xcordon 66F-343 B developed by the Hapardon Kinetic Arms Company not only featured well-rounded specs, but also excelled in the one area that Ves valued the most. At its highest power setting, it could fire an ultra-heavy round that was powerful enough to breach the armor of a Bright Warrior!

Even if the round failed to penetrate the armor of a mech, the incredibly momentous impact still transferred a lot of kinetic energy, which wasn't pleasant even for high-quality mechs!

When Ves enthusiastically brought it to the attention of his girlfriend, she didn't immediately approve.

Instead, she frowned.

"This Xcordon cannon is not the most accurate gauss cannon. Its muzzle velocity is also lower, which means it is even less capable of hitting distant and fast-moving targets."

"Those are tradeoffs that we can accept! If we want to hit agile light skirmishers, the pulse weapons are the most suitable answer to them. If we want to hit distant targets, then the positron beam cannons already cover this area. What we truly lack is a strong armor-piercing solution!"

Eventually, she acquiesced, as the Hexers didn't offer something that performed as well as the Xcordon weapon system.

She still managed to get the better of Ves by pushing through her desired selection of positron beam cannons and pulse weapons.

Since both of them were mostly energy weapons, they demanded a much greater integration to the mech's power supply and heat management systems. This meant that the immediate compatibility between Hexer weapon systems and mechs designed according to Hexer standards was truly the best choice!

"Alright! Now that we have chosen the most important components for our heavy artillery mech, we can choose the remaining components based around our weapons of choice."

This was a much more straightforward selection process. Soon enough, Ves and Gloriana settled on a very nice collection of components that already put their Cat's Paw Project on the right track.

Chapter 2186 Adding Character

With the weapon systems that Ves and Gloriana selected, the overall strengths of their heavy artillery mech already became clear.

The mech design codenamed Cat's Paw was primarily set up to resist a modest amount of very strong opponents.

It excelled in inflicting single-target damage. Just half a dozen Cat's Paw mechs would have allowed the Larkinson Clan to repel or outright defeat the powerful second-class mechs of the Coalition Reserve Corps while suffering much less casualties!

Back then, the CRC mechs slaughtered third-class mechs with the ease of butchering pigs. The vast performance differences between lesser mechs and greater mechs was simply too great.

Whenever Ves played back the archival footage of the Battle of Kesseling VIII, he despaired at the great difficulty of inflicting actual harm to the well-armored mechs of the Friday Coalition.

Even if Ves upgraded his entire mech roster to second-class, tougher and stronger mechs still posed considerable threat.

What he needed the most was a solution that could crack the tough shells of powerful opponents. He was willing to make a lot of tradeoffs and sacrifices in order to secure this capability.

The Xcordon gauss cannon system truly suited his needs. Its size, mass, material requirements and production difficulty were all within acceptable parameters.

More powerful gauss cannons no longer fit the Cat's Paw frame, while weaker models significantly declined in strength. The choice that Ves settled upon was just right.

What Ves liked the most was that the Xcordon possessed character. It was a gauss cannon model that did not shy away from the fact that it was mainly geared towards propelling ultra-heavy rounds with as much kinetic energy as possible.

It was a plain, brutal cannon that did not resort to convoluted technology or highly unusual exotics to achieve its full potential.

With his extensive knowledge on ballistic weapons and kinetic weapons, he could keenly tell that the Xcordon was designed with ruggedness and reliability in mind. Despite the great forces acting on the cannon whenever it fired at its maximum power, its strong and well-designed structure was continually able to endure the punishment.

The chance that the Xcordon malfunctioned or broke down was very low as long as it was properly maintained!

Even without recent maintenance, the weapon system was still rugged enough to function with only a minor reduction in power!

Compared to the rather generic Hexer-developed positron beam cannons and rapid-fire pulse cannons, Ves believed the gauss cannons would become the defining weapons of the Cat's Paw design!

Just imagining the sheer amount of destruction his Cat's Paws could inflict on second-class mechs excited him to no end. His passion for this project quickly grew!

Both Ves and Gloriana observed the current state of their draft design. After hastily slotting in the new components they licensed, They were able to estimate many of the mech's performance parameters.

"If we integrate everything correctly while bleeding as little efficiency as possible, then this heavy artillery mech isn't a waste of 600 million hex credits."

Ves nodded. "I agree. Spending 600 million hex credits for a mech that can pierce the armor of most second-class mechs with a single hit is well worth it in my eyes. It's not fantastic against overwhelming numbers, but we can leave that responsibility to other mechs."

"That said, the physical components are just one aspect of our mech design. Have you decided its divine aspects yet? What proto-god do you intend to add to the Cat's Paw?"

Ah. That was a very important question. To be honest, Ves struggled over his options. He could rely on one of his existing design spirits, but none of them complemented a heavy artillery mech design to a fantastic degree.

The alternative was to create yet another spiritual product. He hadn't done so after he conducted the huge ritual which birthed the Superior Mother.

He knew that as long as he gathered a couple of suitable spiritual fragments and used up a little life-attributed energy derived from the life-prolonging treatment serum, he could create a very powerful spiritual product.

The problem was that he didn't feel like doing so at this time. If it wasn't completely necessary, he wanted to conserve his resources.

He only possessed so much high-grade serum! Wasting it on creating frivolous or redundant spiritual products would only bite him in the butt in the future.

While Ves kept thinking, Gloriana made a surprising suggestion.

"You don't have to invent something new when a ready-made solution is already available. Do you still recall the Deliverer? With Prophet Ylvaine inhabiting the design, he was able to lend his precognitive abilities to any Ylvainan mech pilot!"

Ves grunted. "You don't have to remind me. While it is admittedly one of my more innovative mech designs, it's not exactly relevant now that we are far away from the Ylvaine Protectorate."

"I disagree." She shook her head. "Didn't we absorb thousands of Ylvainans in our clan? The True Ylvaine Dynasty has pretty much merged with us, providing us with crucial trained and skilled personnel at a time when we weren't able to hire enough Brighters to expand our newly-founded clan. Those Ylvainans may have cut off their relations with the Protectorate, but they are still as faithful as ever!"

"Even if that is the case, a Larkinson is a Larkinson. The point of outsiders joining our clan is to transform them into Larkinsons. I have no intention of encouraging any of the adopted Larkinsons to keep their foreign cultural traditions alive!"

Gloriana's projection appeared increasingly more disgruntled. She placed her hands on her hips.

"Ves! I know you have misgivings about our Ylvainan-born clansmen, but you are wasting an extremely precious opportunity here! It is one thing to set aside this option for a commercial ranged mech model because it is too disruptive, but when it comes to our own defense, we should pull out all of the stops! Isn't this why we set a very high budget for our Cat's Paw Project? Since you are readily willing to invest a substantial amount of money in the design and production of our heavy artillery mechs, I don't see why you need to hold back on the choice of proto-god!"

"Do we even have enough Ylvainan mech pilots to man all of the Cat's Paw mechs?"

"There are hundreds! Our factory ship only needs eighty mechs while the combat carriers can only accommodate half-a-dozen or a dozen. Whatever the case, there are enough Ylvainan mech pilots that are already proficient in marksmanship and who can be trained to pilot a heavy mech to meet the manpower requirements."

Even if that was the case, Ves still felt very reluctant to entrust the primary defense of their future factory ship and other important vessels to a design spirit which he didn't entirely trust.

He always harbored some suspicions about Ylvaine's spiritual fragment. Unlike many of his other design spirits, it was derived from an actual human and was too scheming for his liking.

This was especially so when Ylvaine's spiritual fragment began to hook up with James Ylvaine-Larkinson!

The two seemed to have achieved a synergistic bond which had made both of them greater than the sum of their parts.

While Ves did not object to reusing Ylvaine's spiritual fragment as the design spirits of other mech designs, the Cat's Paw mech design played an extremely critical role.

He would rather entrust this great responsibility to the Golden Cat. At least Ves had no doubt that she was completely committed to the survival of the Larkinson Clan!

"Are you thinking about putting the cat in charge again?" She accused him. "As much as I adore her, you shouldn't run to her every time you want to design a mech that is related to our clan. Just look at our Cat's Paw mech objectively. It possesses two major weapon systems that are very powerful against highly-armored targets that aren't very strong on the mobility front. However, aside from relying on its weaker rapid-fire pulse cannons, the Cat's Paw doesn't offer a strong defense against smaller, fast-moving targets!"

"I thought we already decided to leave that job to our other mechs?"

"Even if that's the case, it is still useful to invest in increasing the accuracy and hit rate of the weapons of our mechs! Do you think that every heavily-armored second-class mech is slow? Both the Friday Coalition and the Hexadric Hegemony are able to field numerous assault mechs that are both tough and fast! Aside from that, many expert mechs all start off with at least good mobility no matter how much mass they carry!"

She made a persuasive argument. Even if Ves planned to invest in a strong targeting system for his Cat's Paw mech and even if the mech was able to receive much more accurate targeting data from the ship it was riding on, the fact of the matter was that its weapons would still miss most of their shots.

The positron beam cannons may be able to land a hit at near-relativistic speeds, but the ECM employed by mechs made it significantly harder to make a successful strike at extreme ranges.

Even though mechs were very big compared to a human, at very ranges, even a tiny error induced by ECM could make a shot go hundreds of meters wild!

As for the Xcordon gauss cannons, the Cat's Paw should have a considerably easier time targeting opponents at medium range.

At these ranges, the effectiveness of ECM systems sharply dropped. The very powerful sensors and ECCM systems of a starship was easily able to overcome most interference, which meant that most ranged weapons had a much easier time in landing a hit.

However, as fast as a gauss cannon round could be propelled into space, they still traveled substantially slower than the relativistic speed of a positron beam!

Though it wasn't as bad as third-class ballistic weapons, mech pilots still needed to make continuous predictive judgements and lead their aim in order to land a hit on a fast-moving, evasive target.

Unless Ves incorporated high technology that solved or circumvented some of these issues, he could not get around the fact that highly maneuverable opponents were the bane of his Cat's Paw mechs!

The conventional answer to this problem was to accept this weakness.

The unconventional answer was to try and mitigate this inherent shortcoming.

The more he thought about it, the more Ves felt compelled to borrow Ylvaine's predictive capabilities.

The Deliverer design already proved that the spiritual fragment was capable of fulfilling its promises. He didn't need to fumble around with figuring out the right spiritual construct to add the right triggered ability to the mech. Ylvaine was pretty much able to do it all by himself as long as the recipient was an Ylvainan mech pilot!

He decided to make contact with Ylvaine's spiritual fragment in order to sound out its willingness to lend its power once again.

He closed his eyes and concentrated his mind. Just as his mind made contact, Ylvaine already sent a positive reply.

The fragment had already anticipated his request and enthusiastically assented to it before he even asked!

Ves abruptly broke his concentration. "Goddammit!"

Both Ylvaines always possessed the uncanny ability to predict his questions and actions even when they had no right to know them beforehand.

Yet whenever Ves asked them to predict something more pertinent such as the likelihood of encountering a serious threat in the next 24 hours or whether he was able to gather 100 million MTA merits within a decade, they both played stupid and muttered some mumble jumble!

The cheeky behavior of Ylvaine's spiritual fragment reminded Ves once again why he hesitated in using it as a design spirit in the first place. Yet the great enthusiasm it showed also worried Ves a bit.

If Ylvaine's spiritual fragment actively encouraged him to use it as a design spirit for the Cat's Paw design, didn't that mean this decision might have a very great impact in the future?

Chapter 2187 Mountain Kings

A furious space battle raged forth in space. Hundreds of laser beams and numerous projectiles filled the dusty space, though few of them hit their targets.

Task Force Predator clamped down on yet another pirate outfit lurking in Wreckage Paradise!

The Larkinson Clan already chewed through half-a-dozen mid-sized pirate gangs after defeating the Rust Grinders.

With each defeat, the Black Cats harvested more intelligence which helped them identify and locate the task force's next meal.

Through sheer repetition, the cooperation and battle tactics of the various mech forces in the clan improved.

Though their mech pilots exhibited plenty of clumsy errors at first, they no longer happened as often now that the clan soldiers accumulated some actual battle experience!

The continuous battles against the cunning and ruthless pirates caused a lot of Larkinsons in the fleet to mature.

The most remarkable growth came from the three elite squads led by their respective expert candidates.

Candidate Joshua Larkinson and the Bright Companions rapidly gelled together into a cohesive assault element that could smash through any defense!

His girlfriend Jannzi and her Shieldbearers became more astute at placing themselves where their defense was needed the most.

Tusa Billingsley-Larkinson and his Speed Demons not only became more proficient at reconnaissance, but also excelled at running interference and harassing rear elements.

The rest of the Larkinsons deserved mention as well.

The Ingvar siblings may not have attracted as much attention, but that was because the Bright Warriors they piloted and led overshadowed much of their accomplishments.

Captain Casella Ingvar knew she was very fortunate to receive the right to lead the Second Spaceborn Company of the Avatars of Myth.

As one of the few mech companies that fielded a full complement of Bright Warriors, she commanded one of the strongest elements of the clan!

It was easy to become accustomed to the enormous strength disparity between a bridge mech and a third-class pirate mech. Yet Casella knew that she could never let down her guard no matter how weak the pirates appeared!

The battle taking place at the moment was a typical example. The Avatars along with the other mech forces all dispatched a mech company each in order to test their cooperation.

With less than 200 mechs, they were tasked with defeating a pirate force that fielded around the same amount of mechs.

Normally, the Larkinson Clan mechs should have been able to run through the same number of measly, low-quality pirate mechs.

The problem was that the so-called Mountain Kings were famed for their defenses!

They not only took control of various asteroids and mashed them together into several defensive bulwarks, but also littered the space in between with devious traps!

The sheer amount of mines and pop-up turrets the attack force had encountered severely halted the momentum of their attack.

Casella gritted her teeth as the Solar Warriors held their shields to defend the more vulnerable rifleman mechs of the Sentinels and Battle Criers.

Even if the Larkinson mechs used the surrounding asteroids as cover, they didn't last very long against the large ballistic artillery cannons used by the Mountain Kings!

"Hold together and use your frames to block the incoming attacks if need be! They can't punch through our armor!"

The Mountain Kings installed so many turrets on their asteroid that the sheer volume of fire posed a considerable threat to the more vulnerable mechs of the clan!

The other configurations of the Bright Warrior such as the Illuminating Warrior and the Shining Warrior were also forced to use their frames as a temporary wall against the incoming firepower.

If the entire task force or just the Penitent Sisters attacked at once, the elaborate defense matrix of the Mountain Kings wouldn't have lasted so long.

However, that defeated the purpose of this exercise!

"C'mon!" Imon Ingvar shouted to her over their private comm channel. "I don't see why we are holding back all this time. My mech's sword is aching for pirate blood! Can't you let us go in already?!"

"No." She forcefully said. "Major Verle already told us to stay put, and he makes a good point. These Mountain Kings prepared way too many traps. Who knows if some of them are powerful enough to threaten our Bright Warriors? We have already encountered plenty of surprises from the previous pirate groups we attacked!"

If there is one lesson the Larkinson Clan had learned, it was that many pirate groups prepared some surprises!

With the amount of accumulation and defenses the Mountain Kings prepared, there was a very high likelihood that they too prepared some sort of huge countermeasure.

Therefore, even if maintaining distance and engaging in an extended firefight sounded frustrating, it was the safest method to grind down the Mountain Kings.

With the amazing defenses of the Bright Warrior mechs, the Larkinsons possessed an undeniable advantage in battles of attrition!

As the battle slowly progressed and the defensive bulwarks slowly lost their teeth from the steady and methodical ranged attacks, the Mountain Kings finally couldn't take it any longer.

They were done with acting as the Larkinson Clan's pincushions!

"Uh, sis? Is it me, or are those fortified asteroids moving?"

The sensors of her mech blared an alert, and the command center in the main fleet probably became befuddled as well.

What were the Mountain Kings doing? Why were they sending forth and splitting up their battle fortifications?

The highest command channel suddenly transmitted Major Verle's voice to every Larkinson mech.

"RETREAT! OUR DEEP SENSORS HAVE JUST PICKED UP RADIOACTIVITY FROM THOSE ASTEROIDS! THEY ARE PACKED WITH NUCLEAR BOMBS!"

Though weaker nuclear ordnance did not necessarily pose a threat to the Bright Warriors, the weaker mechs might not be as well off. If the Mountain Kings enriched the nuclear bombs with dangerous exotics, then the resulting explosions might very well be able to accomplish something that no other pirate had managed!

"Fall back, men!" She desperately shouted. "Retreat, but make sure to cover for our weaker mechs!"

The Bright Warriors guarded the rear as the other clan mechs hastily made distance.

"Split up! Disperse your formation!" Major Verle ordered.

New orders transmitted from the command center gave each mech and squad a new heading. The mechs immediately began to spread apart in order to make it harder for a single powerful explosive to affect all of them at once.

So far, the asteroids weren't able to accelerate fast enough to catch up to the clan. Yet all of that changed when smaller portions of their surface broke off from the main body and rapidly accelerated towards the fleeing Larkinson mechs.

"Intercept them! Some of them contain potent fusion bombs!"

The mechs that possessed ranged weapons turned on their axis while their flight systems still propelled them away. They fired their rifles and other ranged weapons at the rapidly-approaching rocks.

Though their surface layers of asteroid material quickly succumbed at all of the focus fire, there were too many of them! Some of them even incorporated thick layers of wreckage salvaged from the surrounding space.

Even though the mechs and starship hull plating weren't very high in quality, it still took a lot of time to penetrate all of those layers!

Casella grew more nervous. The firepower of the attack force wasn't enough to defeat all of the approaching rocks! The Mountain Kings heavily invested in this nasty surprise!

She finally decided to issue a request to Major Verle.

"Please allow my Bright Warriors to fire their missiles at the approaching rocks, sir. Two missiles should be powerful enough to crack through their defenses even with all of the scrap metal in the way."

A brief pause ensued. "No, captain. Those high-quality missiles are valuable consumables that cannot be wasted on this scum. The clan patriarch has already instructed us to employ another solution."

The solution soon became clear as powerful laser beams and positron beams suddenly hammered the accelerating rocks!

Large and powerful volleys of energy beams continuously smashed through the rocks at a much greater degree of effectiveness!

The Penitent Sisters had finally moved into action!

Before this point, they had merely been placed on standby and guarded the main fleet against surprise attacks from the flanks or rear.

Now, a considerable number of their ranged mechs had flown forward and easily smacked down the rocks one by one with their incredibly powerful rifles!

The difference was like night and day as far as Casella and the other clansmen were concerned. They felt both relieved and ashamed that they needed to be bailed out in this way.

This was especially so when some of the rocks began to explode in nuclear fury!

Enormous balls of hot and concussive fury filled the space between the Mountain Kings and the retreating Larkinson mechs!

According to the sensors of her mech, those nuclear explosions were laced with enough volatile exotics to massively increase their threat at close range!

Even at this distance, the numerous explosions still managed to break or overload some of the sensors of their mechs while peppering the mechs with powerful spikes of radiation!

Fortunately, the armor of all of those mechs were sufficiently shielded against this level of intensity, but their surface layers all needed to be treated carefully after this battle!

The moment the Larkinson Clan activated the Penitent Sisters, the outcome of the battle turned into a foregone conclusion.

As much as the Larkinson Clan wanted to use the opposing pirates as target practice, that didn't mean that they wanted to suffer avoidable casualties.

When the ranged mechs of the Penitent Sisters annihilated the rocks that contained the nuclear bombs, they quickly turned their ire at the remaining pirate fortifications.

What took minutes for the Avatars and Sentinels to neutralize only took seconds for the Penitent Sisters!

Unbothered by the sensor-dampening dust clouds the Mountain Kings were spewing in the surrounding space, the Penitent Sister mechs accurately struck each and every turret and fortification. Their laser and positron beams were so powerful that they melted straight through every defensive fixture.

As for the pirate mechs? They lasted just as short when focused upon!

The pure devastation inflicted by just two mech companies of second-class mechs completely rendered the Mountain Kings helpless and impotent.

Soon enough, their last castle had fallen.

The entire sight caused every Larkinson who took part in the prior attack to feel frustrated.

"We failed." Imon told her sister. "We could have beaten these Mountain Kings if we learned of their trick beforehand. If this was a real battle..."

Casella Ingvar grimaced. "It won't be long before we will suffer our first true casualties. We're almost out of Wreckage Paradise. Once we enter Maynard Fields, none of the pirates we face are easy to deal with. That is when our true test starts."

Wreckage Paradise was too barren and too close to the border of the Nyxian Gap to attract the more powerful pirate groups. Even then, outfits with a relatively poor and obscure reputation like the Mountain Kings were already capable of annihilating any attacks with their hidden nuclear ordnance!

The Big Two's prohibition against weapons of mass destruction held no sway in this lawless region.

To many pirates, as long as they kept their controversial weapons secret, then they wouldn't suffer any consequences.

If any battle went poorly for them, then the pirates had nothing to lose by breaking the rules and employing taboo weapons!

After all, they were already destined to die anyway if they lost the battle, so they might as well go out and leverage every possible advantage no matter how much bounty the MTA put on their heads!

So far, Task Force Predator managed to maintain the upper hand by relying on their superior mechs. Yet it was clear to Casella that more changes were needed in order to keep the inevitable losses in the future as minimal as possible.

"We can't keep provoking every pirate group in our way." She muttered.

Even though the Nyxian pirates were anything but united, word of the Larkinson Clan's violent incursion into their space had already spread!

Chapter 2188 Sneaking Up

After the dangerous encounter against the Mountain Kings, Ves completely paused his current work in order to supervise the aftermath.

As much as he wanted to pour all of his time on his major projects, the Nyxian Gap was still a region filled with peril.

The steadily growing spiritual interference that Ves constantly sensed was the least of his worries!

Once the Larkinson Clan salvaged what little valuables the Mountain Kings left behind, the task force moved on. Thousands of mech technicians carefully scrubbed some of the mechs clean from the effects of exposure to radiation.

Some of the parts even needed to be replaced entirely, which entailed a lot of work. The maintenance crews worked like busy bees as they all tried to do their work as quickly as possible in order to minimize the downtime.

Who knew whether the task force might stumble upon a pirate ambush!

Just because it hadn't happened did not mean the Larkinsons should rest easily. They already attracted quite a lot of heat from the local pirates. The Nyxian pirates weren't completely isolated from each other.

At least in the periphery, quantum communication nodes still worked, so they could trawl through the galactic net like anyone in civilized space.

In order to discuss the implications of the battle against the Mountain Kings as well as the task force's changing circumstances, Ves decided to call a meeting.

Ves and Calabast both entered the Scarlet Rose's conference room. Major Verle and Fleet Coordinator Kronon joined shortly afterwards in projection form as they were both on different ships at the moment.

"Good afternoon, everyone." Ves greeted everyone as he sat down on a chair while Lucky floated at his side. "First, let me tell you that I think that near-fiascos like the

previous battles shouldn't happen again. While we have admittedly underestimated how depraved the pirates could be, we were still at risk of losing a decent amount of mechs and precious lives."

Everyone looked grave.

Even Calabast, who normally adopted a playful demeanor in front of Ves, exhibited some concern.

"It is clear that the assumptions that we have made before we departed to the Nyxian Gap are flawed." She spoke. "The intelligence we have gathered mostly consists of unverified rumors and hearsay. I dare say that at least a portion of what we collected might outright be deliberate falsehoods that the Nyxian pirates or their associates have spread in order to lull outsiders into a false sense of security."

That sounded like a very thorough scheme! Ves felt astonished at this bold but increasingly more likely guess.

"So how much do we actually know?"

"It's not as bad as you think, Ves. The Peacekeepers and sources from the Sentinel Kingdom may have fed us with inaccurate information, but with all of the pirates we interrogated and all of the data banks that we have decrypted, we have built up a much more accurate overview of the local regions."

Major Verle shook his head. "That's only partially helpful. What the Rust Grinders knew about the Mountain Kings only amounted to surface details. Every pirate group in the vicinity knew that the Mountain Kings invested in a lot of fortifications. None of them were aware that these fortifications also hid over two-dozen enriched nuclear warheads!"

"I think we wouldn't have been able to know about those nuclear weapons even if we kidnapped and interrogated a mid-level Mountain King officer." Ophelia Kronon noted. "Pirate commanders never entrust sensitive secrets to their own men, and they aren't stupid enough to record such sensitive information in their data banks. We either have to kidnap the pirate commanders directly or grab one of the senior cadre who have been entrusted with operating these trump cards."

That was an unrealistic prospect. Every seasoned pirate commander who managed to survive in the Nyxian Gap wasn't average!

Ves looked towards Calabast, who regretfully shook her head.

"Infiltrating pirate vessels and bases in order to capture and interrogate these senior pirate figures is not viable with our current means."

That was disappointing, but he expected as much. The Larkinson Clan did not possess a lot of true stealth gear.

"We need to do at least something to gain a better understanding of our opponents." Major Verle spoke with some frustration in his tone. "I hate to say this, but I would rather fight the CRC than an entrenched Nyxian pirate outfit. At least we know what to expect of the former. The same cannot be said of the latter!"

Ves sighed. "From what I hear from you all, the root of the problem is our lack of understanding of our foes. The pirates aren't necessarily stronger than us. It's just that their sudden surprises are too threatening."

With enemies who did not hesitate to turn their mechs into starship turrets or prepare a large amount of enriched nuclear ordnance, how could his father and the Oblivion Hand successfully raid so many pirate fortresses?

Unlike Task Force Predator, the Oblivion Hand had run roughshod in the inner periphery and the core regions!

According to the rumors which might not all be accurate, even though the Oblivion Hand sustained a substantial amount of losses with each major attack, they gained even more resources, mechs and recruits in return!

Even if those victories were wildly exaggerated, the rumor that the notorious Dark Cleaver had never lost a battle should still be true!

Ves did not believe that Task Force Predator was weaker than the Oblivion Hand. Leaving aside his father who presumably advanced to expert pilot, the rest of the dark mercenaries should still be piloting weak and fragile third-class mechs!

He suddenly recalled something important.

It wasn't just his father's amazing piloting skills and his excellent leadership that allowed him to secure victory after victory.

His mother should have been involved as well! In fact, Ves knew that with the capabilities she had shown off in front of him, she could easily contribute more to their victories than Ryncol!

The key to this was her myriad abilities as an intangible ghost and a spiritual sorceress. As long as she was able to affect the material realm, she could effortlessly sneak inside a pirate ship or base and mess around with none of the defenders growing any wiser!

The Larkinson Clan may be lacking a perfect saboteur in the form of Cynthia Larkinson, but there was someone in the clan who could replicate at least some of her abilities.

He tilted his head to the side where Lucky lazed around in the air.

"Meow."

"It's time to earn your keep."

"Meow?"

"Hehehe. We'll talk later." He grinned ominously at his cat.

He turned his attention to the others. "Anyway, let's talk about our next steps. We will soon be crossing over into Maynard Fields, right?"

Everyone nodded.

"Maynard Fields is much more perilous. Not only will the density of asteroids increase, but the larger occurrence of exotic deposits can also spawn occasional anomalies. Regardless of what we face, we need to slow our pace and expand out scouting efforts."

They discussed all of the changes they needed to make in order to make sure they traversed the Nyxian Gap safely.

Once their discussion finally ended, the projections of Major Verle and Fleet Coordinator Kronon disappeared.

Ves turned to Calabast, who had been glancing at him with interest.

She had studied all of his habits and behavioral ticks. The way he looked at him right now suggested to her that Ves was thinking of something radical again!

"Not here." She said with a touch of resignation. "Let's head somewhere more secure."

They moved to a separate space next to her office aboard the Scarlet Rose which she had personally renovated and customized to her tastes.

Numerous jammers went active, causing Ves and Calabast to feel a bit discomfited. Lucky hardly took any notice, though.

"Okay. Tell me what's on your mind."

He grinned. "I may have a means to increase our battle odds against the pirates. To be more exactly, it's my cat who is the key."

"Meow?"

"Show her, Lucky."

"Meow meow."

"It's fine. She already knows a lot."

Lucky reluctantly turned intangible in front of Calabast. She observed keenly at the partially-transparent mechanical cat as Ves waved his entire hand through the body of his pet.

"Go show your other trick."

His cat lifted up his paw and tapped the button of his 'collar', causing him to disappear from view!

Now, Lucky not only became intangible, but also invisible!

This time, Calabast really became astonished!

"I see now! This is why he has been able to appear in places where he has no right to be! No wonder why no one is able to detect something as noticeable as a mechanical cat sneaking into heavily-guarded sites."

Ves briefly explained what Lucky was able to do. Lucky's ECM and detection capabilities allowed him to circumvent all sorts of electronic surveillance means. While the cat was able to phase through solid matter and remain intangible for an extended amount of time, his stealth power only lasted for 5 minutes before requiring an extensive recharge.

Though he expected Calabast to react with disappointment, she instead looked quite hopeful.

"With his ability to detect and evade sensors, 5 minutes is enough!" She spoke in admiration. "If it is possible, I'd like to fit him with a customized harness that allows him to carry additional gear. As long as he can carry explosives, poison and other equipment, he can wreak even more havoc once he infiltrated a pirate bulwark!"

As far as Ves knew, Lucky should be able to do so if the harness and additional gadgets were small enough.

Both Ves and Calabast became more taken in by the idea and enthusiastically discussed how to kit Lucky out and how much they could tack onto his frame!

"Meow..."

Lucky looked increasingly more uncertain about this whole ordeal. While he liked to dive into forbidden places, he did not relish infiltrating a hostile pirate base or ship all by himself!

"There is one problem, though." Ves frowned. "Lucky's flight speed isn't all that fast. It's not realistic to allow Lucky to reach a distant pirate fortification by relying on his own flight capabilities without wasting many hours if not days. We need to prepare a more effective means of delivery."

"That's not a problem." Calabast said. "The Jaded Sword carries a Hexer stealth shuttle. Its stealth systems should be more than good enough to remain undetected even at very close ranges."

Ves widened his eyes. "Why didn't you tell me that?!"

"It wasn't necessary to inform you before now. I was afraid you would force my operatives to risk their lives on dangerous infiltration missions. Mind you, the stealth capabilities of the shuttle are impressive, but it's only a vehicle. The real work has to be done by humans, or cats in this case."

"That should be enough!"

Currently, the task force's scouting efforts only allowed them to observe what was happening in the open and on the surface.

There was no way of knowing what the pirates truly kept hidden unless the Larkinsons sneaked someone inside to take a thorough peek.

Fortunately, there was truly no better infiltrator than Lucky in the clan!

Not only that, he could also act as a formidable saboteur. He could not only be instructed to assassinate critical pirate commanders and officers, but sabotage the potent trump cards they held in reserve against major threats.

As long as Ves employed Lucky correctly, they might even be able to recreate some of his father's feats and be able to topple even stronger pirate organizations with ease!

"Hahahaha!" Ves laughed. "Let's test this approach on our next target! We should practice and perfect our methods as much as possible. This is going to be brilliant!"

"I will need your help to build a good harness for Lucky."

"No problem! I need to use up some stealth materials, though."

"I have collected some suitable materials. If that isn't enough, you can also repurpose some of the spare parts that came with my stealth shuttle."

"Good!"

Chapter 2189 True Misfortune

When Ves and Calabast agreed to turn Lucky into a saboteur, the cat in question did not seem very enthused by the prospect.

"Meow! Meow!"

The cat constantly pawed at Ves and tried to make excuses for himself.

"No. You won't be able to pass off this duty this time. Your infiltration efforts can save a lot of lives. If you can scan the pirate bases from inside out, then that is already an incredible valuable gain. It is even better if you can assassinate some important leader figures just before we attack!"

"Meooooow!"

Ves crossed his arms. "You're a member of the clan as well, Lucky. If you don't want to help your fellow clansmen, then at least do it for Goldie. She will grow sad whenever a Larkinson dies."

"Meow..."

"Nitaa, bring the book."

His bodyguard handed over the Larkinson Mandate. The Golden Cat woke up from her nap and curiously looked up at Ves.

Nyaa?

"Tell this dummy of a cat here that he needs to do his duty for the clan."

Nyaaa...

Goldie fell right back to sleep again!

"Urgh! Cats!"

Ves tossed the heavy book in the air, causing it to stop in midair with the help of its antigrav brace. Nitaa calmly reached out and grabbed hold of it before placing it back on her armor.

Though he didn't want to employ this means, Ves had no choice but to provide Lucky with a major concession.

"You can eat any exotics you want." He promised. "When you sneak inside and wreak havoc, feel free to take a bite out of anything that is shiny or yummy to you. The larger pirate organizations all tend to be wealthier. I bet they have accumulated a lot of rare and unique exotics from the surroundings!"

The moment he made this offer, Lucky abruptly froze in realization.

"Meow...?"

Ves nodded. "You get first pick. Just leave the remaining valuable materials to the rest of us. We'll claim the leftovers!"

As voracious as Lucky could be, his dimensional stomach could only digest so much exotics at a time!

Even if he ate all of the crown jewels in the hands of the pirates, there was no way that his hungry cat could devour an entire warehouse's worth of materials!

While Task Force Predator already carried a lot of spare parts and materials to last them for months, it was always helpful to accumulate some of the more valuable exotics that didn't take up a lot of space.

With such a compelling offer on the table, Lucky couldn't resist the temptation!

Even though it was still dangerous for a gem cat like him to infiltrate pirate strongholds by himself, with such an amazing opportunity in front of him, no danger was sufficient to stop him from eating the best meals!

Ves smirked as his cat already started to daydream about all of the yummy exotics he might eat. Though he felt a bit guilty for pushing his own pet to perform extremely dangerous missions, it was not as if Lucky was incapable.

The little bugger had plenty of practice of sneaking around undetected!

After he concluded a deal with Lucky, Ves began to think about building a custom cat harness.

While Lucky was already quite potent and proficient by himself, it didn't hurt to bring some extra tools.

For example, while Lucky could sneak into a bedroom and effortlessly swipe a pirate commander's neck, the assassination might trigger an alarm!

Even if it didn't, the timing of the commander's death might not be right or Calabast might want Lucky to kill off additional key targets without tripping any alarms.

In these cases, it was much more appropriate if Lucky was able to apply poison to his targets that killed within a predictable amount of time.

As for sabotage, Lucky could easily sneak up to a power reactor, but as capable as he was, he was not an engineer. Unless he was able to receive instructions from Ves, Lucky could only outright disable the power reactor or leave it alone in order to avoid alarming the pirates.

It was a different story if Lucky was able to plant a timed explosive instead. When placed in the correct area, even a small bomb could inflict a lot of damage!

This was just what Ves could come up with in a short amount of time. He definitely suspected that Calabast already prepared a dozen more ideas on what to add to Lucky's loadout!

He rubbed his smooth-shaven chin. "Alright. Let's begin with making your harness. Let me mount some stuff on your body."

"Meow!"

Ves dragged Lucky over to the mech workshop and quickly cobbled together some harnesses that vaguely fit the body of a cat.

Each of the harnesses differed in size, mass and other factors. Whenever he mounted them onto Lucky, he told his cat to activate his phasing and invisibility abilities.

After several hours of experimentation, Ves ascertained Lucky's limits. As long as he didn't add anything thicker than the edge of his palm.

This was not as much room as he hoped.

Perhaps one consolation was that Lucky possessed a much higher tolerance for mass. As long as the material wasn't excessively dense, Ves could add all sorts of heavy stuff onto his body as long as his cat's gravity manipulation ability could still keep him aloft.

Even so, every weight added to his body decreased his nimbleness. Considering that Lucky had to rely heavily on his mobility to evade detection, Ves resolved to keep his cat's equipment light.

"Alright." He nodded at Lucky, who found the current harness very cumbersome! "I should collect some good materials. Since your life and the success of your mission are on the line, I better invest heavily."

He opened a design interface and set out to design a proper harness that fit snugly onto Lucky's frame.

Though Ves was already pretty tough, he decided that it didn't hurt to add some additional armor in case the pirates coincidentally detected him and shot at him out of his intangible form.

He created a form-fitting suit of armor that covered his entire cat except for the paws and portions of the head. It would be made out of Breyer alloy and be able to resist small arms fire with ease.

Ves then added a second layer on top that would be made with the various sensor-dampening materials provided by the Black Cats.

He wanted to use the very best in order to minimize the chance of detection, so he directly decided to cannibalize some of the spare parts of the stealth shuttle.

He didn't need to use up too much material as Lucky was just as big as a regular house cat.

Once he added some external fixtures that would allow Calabast to mount all kinds of small and slim-sized gadgets and equipment onto the exterior, Ves felt very pleased at the result.

Lucky would definitely turn into a potent infiltrator and saboteur once he wore all of this gear!

Before Ves finalized the design, he halted.

There was something about the harness that made him feel a little uncertain.

It was as if it was missing something.

"What else can I add?"

Perhaps that was the wrong question to ask.

"What is it lacking?"

As Ves began to think about the potential threats he might face, he slowly recalled the unusual spiritual phenomena he perceived in the imaginary realm.

He recalled the warnings given to his mother as well as the information that Nitaa had passed on about the Five Scrolls Compact.

"Damn. I almost overlooked this possibility."

The Five Scrolls Compact definitely maintained a presence in this space! Ves had a very strong suspicion that their regional headquarters was located close to the center of the Gap.

Even if their core members never left their base, Ves knew the Compact raised a lot of splinter organizations.

The Church of Hatuumak came to mind. Those weird cultists who exhibited strange spiritual abilities that managed to confound his senses had almost caused him and the Flagrant Swordmaidens to succumb to an ambush!

If an unimportant splinter organization like that was already capable of performing strange but effective trickery, then whatever branch organizations the Compact erected in their backyard should be even more potent!

Ves struggled for a moment before deciding that this case was truly severe enough to merit a greater investment.

"I'm not sure if this will work, but I guess I can give it a try."

He briefly left for this stateroom and returned with the second B-stone he obtained.

He held it close to Lucky. "Does it hurt you if this rock is close to you?"

"Meow."

"Okay. That's good. Now, can you carry it around or will its properties resist your ability?"

In theory, Lucky shouldn't be able to extend his intangibility powers onto a B-stone, as the latter resisted spiritual intrusions.

Ves carefully cut a decent-sized chunk from the main rock and attached it onto Lucky.

"Meow meow!"

His cat reacted as if the rock was an intense source of irritation!

"Can you turn intangible?"

Lucky concentrated for a moment. Despite the effort he put into phasing himself out, it didn't work!

"Meow!"

"Damn."

The B-stone apparently resisted Lucky's efforts, which was a major letdown.

However, Ves did not give up immediately. He cut the rock in two before telling Lucky to attempt again.

This time, he successfully managed to phase himself out! Even though Lucky appeared considerably more strained than before, the B-stone was just small enough for Lucky to brute-force his phasing powers!

It was anything but uncomfortable for him though. Lucky quickly materialized himself back into realspace again and glared at Ves for subjecting him to this strain.

"Meow meow meow!"

"I'm sorry, but this is necessary. At least we know it can work! Tell you what, I'll reduce the B-stone even further before I incorporate it into your harness."

At its current volume, Lucky could hardly maintain his intangibility. Ves was forced to cut down the sample even further before his cat stopped complaining as much.

Now that he found the right amount of B-stone, he amended the design for Lucky's harness and included the B-stone as the innermost layer.

Even though B-stone was quite good at resisting spiritual attacks and intrusions, it wasn't really tough.

After fine tuning his design, Ves immediately proceeded to fabricate it by hand. He carefully exerted himself and made sure to achieve the highest quality possible.

Though the end result was far from a masterwork, it at least looked reliable enough to serve Lucky well in his upcoming infiltration missions!

Once he fitted the completed harness onto Lucky, his cat suddenly turned dark. Due to the stealth coating applied to the exterior, Lucky literally turned into a black cat!

"Meow!"

"I know you look different, but that's the point! Haha, I think you can pass off as a true mascot for Calabast's organization now. If not for your partially-exposed claws and snout, you would truly make for a convincing metal black cat!"

Though the armor already fit Lucky decently well, Ves took the time to tweak the fittings in order to make sure it absolutely fit the frame of his cat like a glove.

Only after that did Ves invite Calabast into the workshop to see the end result.

The spymaster raised his eyebrows. "Your cat looks rather annoyed."

"He'll get over it. Now what do you think. Can you fit your gear onto the attachments I placed onto the harness."

"It's not a problem, though the size and volume limitations will limit what Lucky can do. What do you call it, by the way?"

"I haven't thought of that. Wait. I have a good idea. Why not call it the Misfortune Harness? Wherever Lucky shows up like this, he will doubtlessly spread a lot of misfortune!"

The misfortune that Ves and Lucky tended to inflict on others was different from how Jovy's design philosophy worked.

Unlike Jovy who used his strange probability manipulation powers to nudge reality in an unfavorable direction for someone, Ves preferred to walk up to the person in question and kick him in the nuts!

Chapter 2190 Directing Projects

Just kitting out Lucky with the Misfortune Harness did not mean he turned into an expert saboteur.

There was a huge difference between sneaking into guarded facilities in order to surreptitiously munch on exotics in storage and to perform effective sabotage!

What to do first upon entry. How to identify critical components. How to rank them in priority. How to search for key personnel. How to kill them without compromising the other goals of the mission. How to return to the stealth shuttle without getting detected and shot to. Lucky needed to undergo systematic training in order to turn into a capable Black Cat!

Calabast took hold of Lucky, who still wore the black-coated full-body harness, and smiled in an adoring fashion.

"I'll turn you into a true terror after a few days. With all of your capabilities, you'll be able to single-handedly topple entire fortresses! Your abilities are wasted in the hands of Ves."

"Meow!"

As the woman took the gem cat turned commando cat away, Ves completely put Lucky out of his mind and began to cast his mind back to his mech designs.

With two major projects demanding most of his attention, he really didn't have that much time to spend on managing the task force.

Fortunately, the four minor projects demanded much less personal attention. Aside from spending some time on drafting a design and selecting some key components, the assistant mech designers only had to follow his instructions and work out the details by themselves.

While Ves did not have to be personally involved in every decision and implementation, he had to make sure to keep track of the projects and make sure they followed his vision. If the assistants designed without direction, it was impossible to form a spiritual foundation.

Even then, the spiritual foundations of the minor projects were substantially weaker than he was used to. In order to make up for the deficit, Ves had to act wasteful and purposefully transfer a substantial amount of spiritual energy into the incomplete mech designs.

This was a rather forceful and unnatural process of fostering life in a mech design. He felt rather unsure whether the spiritual quality of any of the minor mech designs would meet his standards.

"Well, completing four additional mech designs is better than completing nothing at all. They don't have to be my best work. They just have to meet the LMC's standards."

He already resigned himself to the possibility that all of his minor mech projects wouldn't be as spiritually potent as his major mech projects.

It was like trying to raise several children in a Kinner training camp rather than pouring attention on a single kid in a loving household. The former did the job of training massive amounts of competent adults, but the latter had a considerably higher chance of leading a fulfilling life!

Even so, Ves was very experienced in spiritual manipulation, especially when it came to tying it together with mech design. He had gained an increasing grasp of the rules and mechanisms that affected the formation of spiritual foundations. This meant he could 'game the system' in order to achieve the maximum result with relatively little time investment.

This was important, because the quality, quantity and purity of a mech design's spiritual foundation determined the functioning of spiritual constructs.

A strong, high-quality foundation not only allowed him to form more triggered abilities, but also increase their strength and potency.

A mech design that endured a lot of neglect produced a shaky, spotty foundation that didn't leave Ves with much to work with. Even if he did form a spiritual construct, the triggered ability probably wouldn't meet his expectations.

"I don't have to worry about that at this moment. Their foundations have barely formed."

In the first couple of months, the technical development of the minor projects took primacy. Making the right design choices, structuring the design process and providing guidance to the assistants. The more exotic and exciting implementations came in the later stages when the designs became more solid.

The Chiron, despite its rather low specs, was a very complicated machine. The ability to adapt its shape and change the proportions of its limbs had to be designed from the ground up, which entailed performing a lot of calculations as well as trial and error.

Since Ves decided to reserve the training mech for the Larkinson Clan, he opted to make use of stronger and more premium materials. While this provided the mech cadets with much greater protection against accidents, they were quite expensive and difficult to integrate.

Though Ves found it rather tedious to keep track of all of these changes, Gloriana thought differently.

To her, it was an interesting puzzle!

With Gloriana watching over this minor project with greater attention, the Chiron would definitely become a worthy training mech for the Larkinson Clan.

The Ferocious Piranha was a lot more straightforward. As a spaceborn skirmisher meant to bring the Doom Guard's terror aura to the enemy, the mech just needed to abide by the classic characteristics of its mech type.

It had to excel in mobility, of course. Ves paired the mech design with a very powerful lightweight flight system. As a trade off for its powerful accelerated and quick response times, the wings of the Ferocious Piranha drained energy at a rapid weight, which was quite a serious problem to a machine that couldn't carry a lot of energy cells!

Ves envisioned the Ferocious Piranha to be utilized in rapid strikes, flanking attacks and very quick raids. It had to be able to cross distances in space as rapidly as possible in order to bring its terror glow within the range of an enemy formation.

The damage it inflicted was secondary to the glow it exerted onto the enemy.

That said, Ves did not wish to devolve any of his mechs into glow delivery machines. Therefore, he tried to figure out a way to make his vision for the Ferocious Piranha more distinctive.

"The glow alone isn't capable of breaking enemy mech pilots unless the Ferocious Piranha gets very close. The Doom Guard is at least able to back up its threat with a wide-area flamethrower. A light skirmisher only has some piddly knives."

He failed to come up with good ideas for now, so he decided to mull over the decision later. Perhaps his experiences in the Nyxian Gap might provide him with some inspiration.

When Ves turned to the Sanctuary, he deliberately aimed to keep it simple. As an offensive space knight, its primary function was to maintain a zone that dampened glows as much as possible, whether benign or malignant.

Unlike the Ferocious Piranha, the Sanctuary didn't require too many gimmicks or additional flair. As a mech designed to offer sanctuary against volatile spiritual auras, Ves believed he needed to design the mech as something that conveyed silence, purity and tranquility.

"Kind of.. like a religious mech."

His face grew ugly as the vision he formed of the Sanctuary began to resemble the Transcendent Messenger, Holy Soldier and Deliverer mechs.

"This is not going to be an Ylvainan mech!"

Turning it into an Ylvainan mech meant that most of his customers wouldn't be able to make use of it. Customers would have to go through great lengths to hire devout Ylvainan mech pilots in order to make use of its glow dampening field.

"The mech has to be a product that is accessible to anyone. I don't want to exclude the majority of the mech market."

Ves wasn't sure how he could form a glow dampening field from his existing selection of design spirits.

"Maybe I need to create a new one for this. The most suitable candidates are too exclusive to particular groups of mech pilots."

If he created a specific spiritual product that solely focused on suppressing glows, then it would likely be strong enough to meet his demands.

However, he couldn't exactly form a spiritual product that possessed the right spiritual attributes related to suppressing glows out of nowhere. He needed to collect the right ingredients, and that sounded very difficult, especially in a rather chaotic place like the Nyxian Gap.

He scratched his head. This problem sounded fairly thorny. He made a note in his implant to look out for anything they came across or looted from pirates that might contribute to the creation of the right spiritual product for the Sanctuary.

As for the Crystal Lord Mark II, Ves couldn't be more attached to the project. As his second original mech design, he had long daydreamed of what kind of upgrades and changes he wanted to make in order to turn it into a mech that was ready for the modern battlefield!

The crystal aspect of the mech needed to be maintained, or else it wouldn't do its name justice.

As a mech specifically designed to counter other laser-armed mechs, Ves studied the MTA's component library extensively for a better and more practical crystal to place on the center of the chest.

Surprisingly, he found plenty of suitable substitutes to the original alien crystal. These were human-developed products, so they lacked much of the mystery and unknown applications developed by long-dead aliens.

While that made them simpler to make and easier to understand, their power level wasn't as high as he expected.

"The energy absorption and retaliation functionality are both roughly similar to the products of the crystal builder civilization." Ves noted as he continued to browse the list.

He felt it was a bit of a pity to leave aside alien tech for human tech. However, he had no choice, as the alien crystal technology did not progress and advance because all of its original researchers were long extinct.

Unless Ves founded a research institution that specifically deciphered the alien mechanisms of the crystal builder tech, he could forget about obtaining improved alien crystals.

This was something that required a major investment, but Ves wasn't confident at all that it would pay off in the end.

Ves was a mech designer, not a component developer! Swapping outdated parts for newer ones was a normal approach towards updating old designs.

He just felt a bit depressed because the slightly alien nature of the mech was one of its defining characteristics. Its strange head that consisted of numerous holes that shone like stars looked very ominous. The vapor from the Festive Cloud Generator leaking from those cavities added even more mystique to the machine.

Thinking about the obvious alien influences in the appearance of the original Crystal Lord, Ves couldn't help but scratch his head once again.

"What was I thinking?"

The mech simply looked too weird. Compared to many other mech models on the market, the Crystal Lord Mark I clearly didn't look human enough!

From a marketing standpoint, it made a lot more sense to morph the Crystal Lord Mark II into a more classical humanoid mech.

Yet a part of him wanted to resist this change. As logical as it sounded, he felt he would deprive the Crystal Lord line of its alien heritage in a permanent fashion.

Ves did not wish to cripple or warp the original Crystal Leader fragment which his mother had bestowed to him in the past.

It was that simple act of his ghostly mother that originally set him on the path working with design spirits to empower his mech designs!

"A revision of an old design doesn't have to preserve the original traits. That doesn't mean I should do so in this situation."

He needed to think very deeply on the current and future role of the Crystal Lord. Depending on his choices, he could steer the Crystal Lord into a more human incarnation or he may insist on keeping its original alien character.

Even if he settled this choice, he also had to make other changes to the mech. The original Crystal Lord didn't excite the market enough and the Mark II might follow the same route if he did not change more aspects of the mech.

"Does it need another gimmick?"